

orado, to Colorado he was bound. "I'm a fixin' up his room for him," said the mother, "and it shall stay fixed for him as long as I live."

"I reckon it's no use, Melindy," said the farmer. "He's gone, and that ain't much loss, but I'm glad he sent the filly back, and that's the truth."

"Oh John, you thought he was mean enough to take her. Maybe we have thought too hard of him other ways too. O my boy, my poor boy!"

CHAPTER II

A week later a young man, sitting in the bar of a western tavern, was chuckling over a newspaper which he was reading, when a big, rough looking fellow said to him, "what is the fun, pard?"

"O they got me killed in that railroad smash down on the slope, and it's about the best thing as what has happened to me in a long while."

"Well I don't see as to that," replied the big fellow, "cept as it might be convenient like to cover up your tracks 'bout something."

"I haint no cause to cover up my tracks," said the young man, "but it's like this: The old folks was always rough with me, and I reckon they had plenty of cause, for the day I was any good to 'em is hard to recall. You see they are hard workin', and 'specatble, and church goin', and I was never none of them things as I can recollect, and it would be a liftin' of a load if I should turn up dead in a railroad smash. I do believe the old folks would feel thankful."

"And what do you be thinkin' about doin' over it?" inquired the big fellow.

"Why, I'll send 'em a copy of this paper. It was a close call, sure enough, and I reckon something must have fell out of my pocket with my name on it and lodged on one of them dead tramps as had no name, and that's the way they got me dead."

"Well, all I have to say, young feller, is that if you've got a mother back in the east whar she nursed you, and worked night and day for you, and now you send her a cruel lie like that, I surmise you must be purty tough, in fact a little too tough for me, tho I be a purty hard case myself, and so you may paddle your own canoe in that little business layout we were talkin' about."

Jake Harkless, for it was he, felt this rebuke somewhat, but it did not change his purpose, and a few days thereafter farmer Harkless received a marked copy of the paper giving an account of the disastrous wreck.

From the day she read the name of her boy among the slain, Melinda Harkness pinned away and died. She died that lingering death, lingering even thru many years, of a broken heart whose depth of woe God alone can fathom. As in the event of the long weary years she lay, at last, breathing out her life, in those awful last moments when the soul trembles on the verge of eternity, suddenly a glad light came into her eyes and with a supreme effort she said,—they were her last words,—“Keep the room fixed for

him, John. He is not dead. He is coming back."

CHAPTER III

Away out in the mountain fastnesses and remote mining camps of Colorado there was for many years a strange personage known far and wide as "Prodigal Jim." Back in the days when there were yet only a few straggling settlements in that vast empire he was a brave hunter and pioneer miner, rough and rugged like the rest.

Like most of his comrades he had left plain parents in the east, and for many years let them remain in cruel ignorance of his fate. A very little effort at times when he was in reach of a post office would have sent to his waiting, longing mother a message more precious than all the gold of the mountains, but Jim did not send it.

Finally when wealth had smiled upon him and self reproach had frowned him into shame for his neglect of that loving mother, he set his affairs in order and started for his old eastern home.

Then began his heart to expand with all the generous thoughts of what he would do for his mother, thoughts and purposes made more generous because he felt that he must make atonement in some way for his past unfilial conduct. With the delighted animation of a school boy on his holiday he told his plans to the companions of his long journey. "I guess the old folks won't have to work any more," said he to a mild looking traveler.

"How so?" inquired the latter.

"Well, stranger, you see I've struck luck in the diggins and I'm going back home now to make a soft nest for the old folks. They made many a soft nest for me, stranger, when I was a little chap, and I guess I'll make it up to 'em now and double it, too. That's what I'm thinkin'."

"Good boy," said the mild looking man.

"Wrong trail, stranger. Been t'other way mostly. Besides I don't think a feller needs to be called good just because he is goin' to do his plain dooty."

"Guess the old people know you are coming," said the traveler.

"Haven't said a word. Goin' to take 'em by surprise. You see, stranger, I'll just stop in the city and load up with a whole outfit of nice things for ma and pa and I'll drive out in a kerridge for 'em both, and they needn't kill any fatted calf neither, for I'll bring the fatted calf along, so I will, and I just wish you could be there, stranger, to see the jubilate' there'l be in that old farm house."

"So you've read about the returning prodigal, I see."

"Stranger, that's the thing as stuck to me all thru the mountains, and I sez, sez I, that prodigal was a sort of slivelin' mean scamp who went back to sponge on his dad when he didn't have nothin' to go on no more, not even good rags. Now sez I, Jim Parkham, when you start to go back to the old folks if you don't go back in style, old feller, I'll just take and wear your mean hide out, that's what I'll do. Sez I, I'll go back on top of the stage, or not at all, sez I."

"Well, I'm glad of it," said the mild looking man. "Hope you will find them well and hearty and booked for many years of comfort and happiness."

"That's what's a botherin' of me some; but they are all right yet, I guess. It's been many a long year tho; fact is I've lost track of the time tetotally in the mountains, and it might be longer than I think. Stranger, if the old folks ain't alive,—but I can't bear to talk of that, stranger." And the big, rough man drove back the tears, and seemed to be trying to choke down something.

"'Pears to me," he continued, looking out of the car window, "this ere train goes pokin' 'long so slow. Wish I had my pony here, I'd show 'em his heels mighty quick."

Yes, the train was going too slow to save the heart of Jim Parkman from breaking over his mother's grave, where they had buried her long ago. They told him the last words she ever spake, words welling up from a heart worn out with vain watching and waiting: "O, where is my boy?"

All that he could do with his money was to put a proud monument over that grave. And for a month he went there day after day and night after night, and people heard him begging in broken, piteous tones to his mother to forgive him that he had not written to her, that he had neglected her declining years until it was too late to make even the poorest return for her deathless love.

A marvelous change came over him during that month of unavailing anguish and before he went away he sought the silver haired pastor of his mother's church and said to him in his rough way: "Parson, I just want you to put your hands on my head, ordainin', I believe they call it, and pray that Jim Parkman's tongue may be set loose so that he can go back into them mountains and tell that prodigal story as it has never been told there before. They know me, parson, and they'll listen when Jim Parkman tells 'em that story right out of his sore heart. Now up and do it, parson."

CHAPTER IV

Then it was that he began that wonderful career of evangelism among the rough mining camps of the Colorado mountains, preaching only that marvelous story of the prodigal son. With infinite variations of local coloring and local adaptation he told and retold with moving pathos that story of stories, and so he became known far and wide in the wild mountains as "Prodigal Jim," and many wondering boy he restored to his father and mother ere the fond eyes which were patiently watching were forever dimmed in death.

One day he reached a remote mining camp and the boys, curious to hear him, soon had a shed fitted up with rude benches, to which they escorted Prodigal Jim and ordered him to go ahead. It was a strange looking throng and a strange looking preacher. There was not much church decorum to make things smooth and orderly, but the wild rough fellows with long hair and fierce faces appeared to be willing to listen, and so the preacher began.